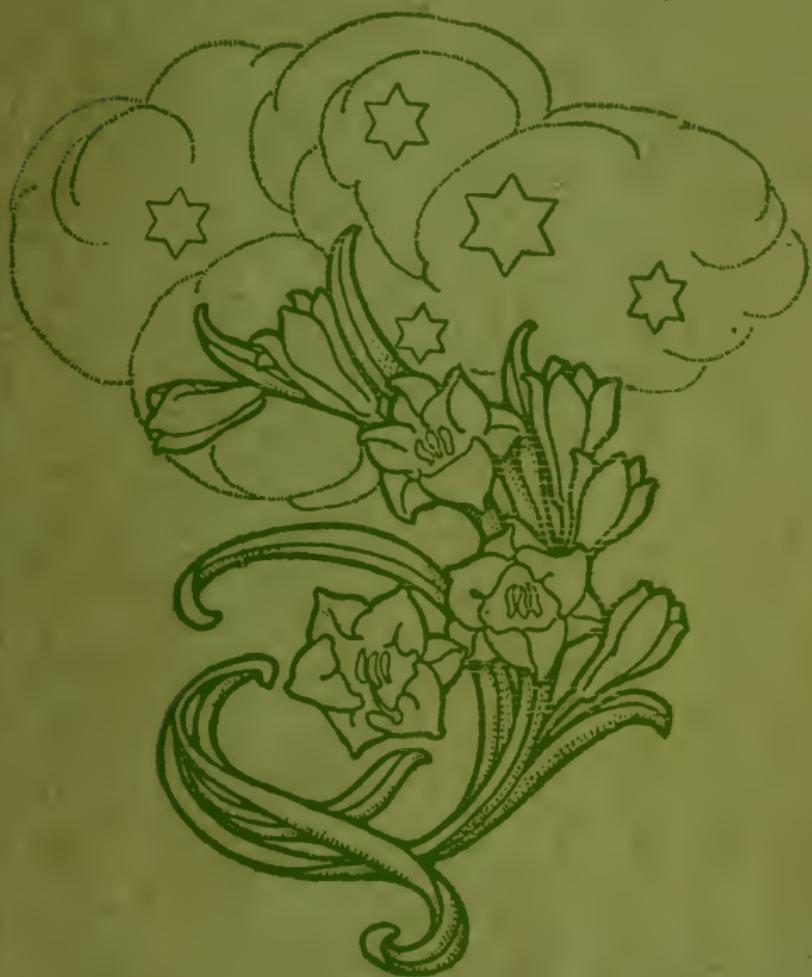


HOW THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM



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Dear Bobby: - A very
happy Christmas to you -

Davy

December, 1911

HOW THEY CAME TO
BETHLEHEM





HOW THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM

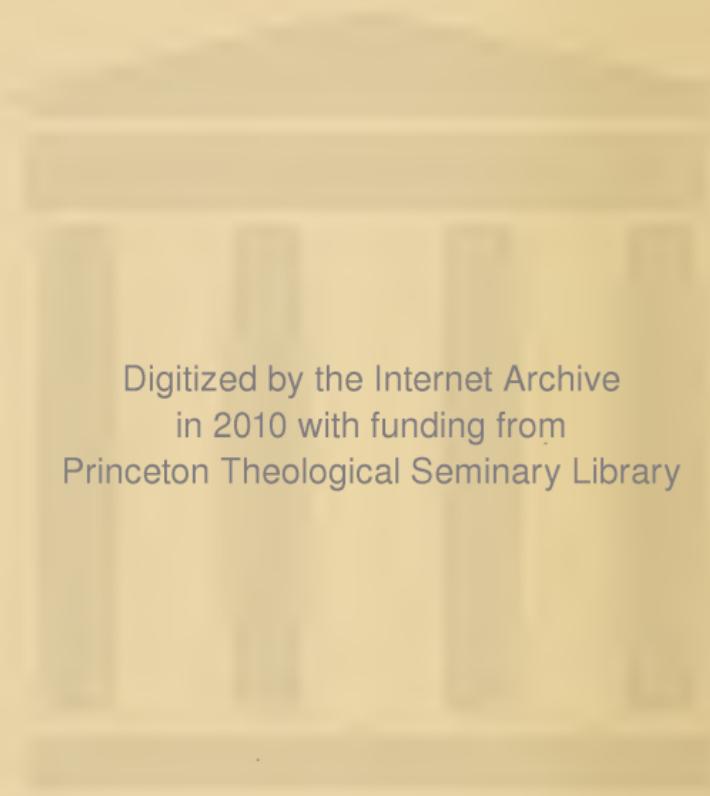
DAVID DE FOREST BURRELL



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To
a certain Elect Lady,
the kindly soul of the Manse
wherein this little story found itself;
and to all who are not afraid
to let their reverent imaginings
lend color to their thoughts of Jesus.



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HOW THEY CAME TO BETHLEHEM

WESTWARD across the highlands of Persia the caravan journeyed. Soft-footed, with long stride, the dromedaries led the way over the dry and treeless plain toward the one spot of green in all the grayness. The white-robed Wise Men in their richly caparisoned saddles sat silent. The servants riding after with the pack animals talked in weary tones through parched lips. At length they reached the shade of the oasis. Through the deep green of oaks and mulberries gleamed the white walls of a town. Where a pool lay, dark and cool beneath the trees, there they halted. The camels knelt. The Wise Men descended, and drank deep draughts of the cheering water.

Through the thicket came a woman from the town, water-jar swinging in her hand. Silently, as if she saw not the strangers, she came to the edge of the pool, stooped, and filled her jar with

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gurgling, sparkling water. One of the Wise Men drew near as she rose and lifted the jar to her shoulder.

“Peace to thee, my daughter!”

“And to thee, my father,” she replied; but her voice was dull as lead, and her eyes as she looked at him were clouded as if they saw not, and red as if they were ever weeping.

“Is thy heart heavy?”

“My heart is very heavy, O Wise Man; and the light of mine eyes is gone out. My husband hath died, and my little one hath died, and the home is empty, and there is no joy in life.”

Then spoke the Wise Man cheerily: “We go to find the King who giveth joy, my daughter. We have seen his star at its rising. He shall lighten all hearts. Come thou with us and find him.”

A spark of hope gleamed for a moment in the woman’s eyes. “Can he give me back mine own?” she asked with hungry voice; and the Wise Man said, “It may well be. Thine own are in his hand. Come thou and discover.”

And the lonely woman laid her water-jar down at the root of a tree and said, “I will go.”

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Before them the mountains rose, bare and brown and bleak, crowned with a white crown under the cloudless sky. Through the foothills they passed, and so up, ever higher, through a gloomy gorge, until at length the gorge opened out before them and they saw, far below, the green plains beribboned with broad silver rivers, and far beyond, the dim grayness of the desert. Slowly the way wound down into the valley. Thus they came to the Great River; and on a ferry they crossed, and journeyed ever westward. And now their way led between green fields of waving grain, past many a town and village by the river-side, past the hills of crumbling brick that once had been great Babylon, and so along the river-bank for many a day, until the walls and roofs of Carchemish shone white in the distance under the hot sun.

They drew near and entered the city. Through markets and streets the dromedaries passed with stately tread, threading their way through a riot of color and noise, while all around drew back and wondered. Suddenly one of the Magi halted his camel. Within the archway before which they stood a man

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sat cross-legged on the floor, chaffering with the owner of the shop. One coin after another he threw upon the floor; but ever the dealer shook his head. The Wise Man called,

“Ho, Ibrahim!”

The bargaining ceased. The would-be purchaser turned a startled face, swept up the coins from the ground, and with a greeting rose and came out into the street.

“Thou, Wise Friend! Whence? And whither?” he cried.

“We go,” said the Wise Man, “to find the new-born King of the Jews, who shall bring peace to the world. Come thou with us!”

“Nay, nay! Wait ye a week and I will go, mayhap. There is a certain silken robe yonder I must have, and 'twill take a week to bring down the Jew's price. And ye seek his King? There is no hurry. Wait ye, and it may be I will go.”

“Thou art rich beyond dreams,” said the Wise Man, looking down at his friend; “and thou hast many a silken robe. Do they give thee happiness? Hast found the secret?”

Then Ibrahim laughed; but there was

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no joy in his laughter. "Happy? Nay, not I!"

"Hast peace in thy heart?"

"Nay, not I!"

"Come thou! We go to find the King; and finding the King thou shalt find peace and joy."

"But—the silken robe——"

"Nay; the King will clothe thy soul for thee!"

And the man Ibrahim thrust his handful of coins into his wallet and, turning to the Jewish merchant in the shadow of the archway, "Keep thy silks, friend!" he cried; and to the Wise Man, "I go!"

And so he joined the caravan.

In the early morning they set out, still following the tawny river up its course. At length they left the green fields by the river and followed the road where it stretched across a gray expanse of wilderness. The dust rose in clouds about their heads. The sun beat down upon them. So they journeyed. One day they passed a poor village by a stagnant pool, and saw before them, plodding along alone, a little lad. Steadfastly he looked ahead, and ever walked

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on sturdily. They caught up with him and called, and halted to speak.

“Peace to thee, little lad!”

“And to ye all, O my fathers.”

“Whither goest thou, little lad?” said one.

“To find a friend, O my father.”

“A friend? Hast thou no friend?”

“Nay, none. Outcast am I. And one in the market-place back yonder told me that if I did but reach the end of the road I would find a friend. And I need a friend, O my father.”

“Yea, and thou shalt find one. At the end of the road we shall find One who is Friend to all the world. Come thou with us. Thou shalt ride with me.”

And the little lad climbed upon the shoulder of the kneeling camel, and the camel got to his feet, and the journey went on.

They came to Palmyra, set like a jewel in the midst of the desert. Through its crowded streets they slowly moved, past the mighty colonnade of the Temple of Baal, and so to their inn. The early morning saw them on their way through aisles of columns and shrines that lined the streets of the city,

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gleaming pale in the faint light before the dawn. Before them, facing the east, now loomed the great bulk of the Temple of the Sun. Even as they drew near, the clear, shrill voice of a priest upon its highest tower proclaimed the sunrise to the sleeping city. Then silence again. As they passed the temple gates, the priest whose voice they had heard hailed them from the windows within. A moment later he stood beside the dromedaries of the Wise Men.

“Peace to you, O ye blest of heaven with wisdom!”

“And to thee!” spoke the eldest of the Wise Men. “And thou—art thou not of us?”

The man drew himself up, then smiled as if in scorn of himself. “My name,” he said simply, “is Chokmah—Wisdom. Men call me the Wisest of the Wise Men. Ye have heard of me. I know your quest. I too have searched the heavens. I too have read the prophecies of the Jews. In the Midrashim I found it—*A star shall come forth out of Jacob. . . . In the fifth year . . . it shall shine forth from the east, and this is the star of the Messiah. . . . At the close of the seventh year the Messiah is*

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to be expected.' Runs it not thus, O friends?"

The three upon their dromedaries nodded, and he spoke on: "And the seventh year is well-nigh gone. . . . And ye journey to see the Messiah . . . And I would journey with you, if I were sure. . . . I have seen many years, and I know much. . . . None has pierced to the heart of the world as have I. . . . But *how* can it be? The world hath moved; but—a Saviour? I know not——"

So he mused. The Wise Men sat silent. A sudden word fell upon the air in the clear soft voice of the little lad. "O my father," quoth he to the one before whom he rode, "the man hath too much wisdom."

The Wise Man nodded his head gravely, and spoke to the priest, "The lad hath spoken. O son of the stars, thou hast yet one thing to learn. Come thou and see the King, and learn thy littleness."

And the priest, the Wisest of the Wise Men, answered, looking not at the speaker but at the little lad in the saddle before him, "I come."

"We are one more, my father," said the little lad.

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So they rode until at length they entered the dreary bulwark of hills that caught and held back from beautiful Damascus the hungry wind-blown sands of the desert. Here, crouching by the wayside, a poor creature held his hand before his disfigured face and wailed a warning, "Unclean! Unclean!"

The Wise Men halted their camels, and one spoke. "Peace be to thee, O my brother!" he said.

The outcast, startled by the unaccustomed greeting, mumbled an answer.

"Wouldst thou be clean, O my brother?"

A hoarse cry broke from the lipless mouth, and the trembling wretch drew nearer.

"Come no nearer!" commanded the Wise Man. "Thou art still unclean. But we go, O my brother, to see One whose touch is health to body and soul. Follow thou behind us, at a distance. A horse shall be left for thee."

The caravan went on its way through the brown hills. The little lad twisted himself in the saddle and peered back over the Wise Man's shoulder and laughed for joy. "He follows! He follows!" and he settled himself again,

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his head against the Wise Man's breast.

"We are one more, O my father," said the little lad.

Now the hills to the west parted before them, and they entered the emerald paradise in whose heart shone white the walls and temples and palaces of Damascus. Beyond, again, the mountains rose, a snowy bank that filled the western horizon. Betwixt green fields and groves of delicious shade their road wound across the plain and brought them along the bank of a foaming river through cool orchards to the city gate. As the caravan entered, the little lad craned his neck and looked back.

"The leper hath halted his horse," he said.

"He is unclean. He cannot come among men."

And so they entered the city. Every city was a wonderful place to the little lad, a maze of streets, a blaze of colors, a babel of sounds. He saw a water-carrier with blackened, swollen water-skin upon his back. He saw a company of glittering soldiers whose armor clashed and clinked as they strode through the opening crowd. He saw

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merchants in gorgeous robes sitting impassive in the bazaars. He saw the sun-blacked Bedouin from the desert, with flowing headdress and flowing robe. He saw a slave, black, naked, glistening with sweat, tottering under the burden with which he followed his master. He saw the slave stumble and fall, and the burden crash to the pavement, and the man lie there exhausted, deaf to the curses of his furious master. He saw the master's foot go back to kick. And the little lad cried aloud and pointed. Then the dromedary stopped, and the Wise Man spoke, while the master stayed his foot.

“Is he thy slave?”

“Ay, lord, and worthless.”

“Thou hast made him so. Here be one hundred drachmæ. The man is mine.”

“Two hundred, lord.”

“One hundred is too much. I have spoken. Is it a bargain? Lift him to his feet.”

Trembling, the poor black stood before his new master. The little lad looked, and wept for pity and joy. The Wise Man spoke:

“O my brother, we go to see a King

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in whose realm all souls are free. Thou art free. If thou wilt come with us, come!"

Then the man caught the Wise Man's foot in his scarred hands and kissed it.

"O my master, I come," was the broken reply.

"We are one more, O my father," said the little lad as the caravan went again on its way through the city to the inn.

Southward now, with the sun in their faces, they journeyed along the great paved highway. Behind them, alone, came the leper on his horse. At every halting-place, when they left, the little lad made sure that food was left behind for him. The road led now by the tumbling, foaming river, where rows of poplars stood tall and straight; now by thickets of oleander and willow that hid the river from view; now through meadows strewn with many-colored flowers; through many a village and town, flat-roofed and dirty; past many a hillside robed in the deep purple of iris; by the black tents of Arabs encamped about the springs by the road; along the shore lapped by the blue waters of the Lake of Galilee; through orchards where the

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hardy farmer-folk, gathering their olives from the silver-wreathed trees, stopped to gaze in open-mouthed wonder at the strange company, and fled with curses from the leper who came last, alone.

So the days passed; and so they came, one day, to a village by Jordan, and in the heat of noon they rested in their tents. It was here, in the doorway of a house at the end of the village street, that the little lad, wandering about, curious, found a woman standing. She wore no veil, this woman, and she laughed at him boldly, and spoke in a tongue he knew not. So he brought his friend the Wise Man and entreated him to speak with her. And when she saw the Wise Man's kindly eyes searching her face she grew silent, and smiled no more, and a troubled look came into her eyes.

Then spake the Wise Man: "Peace to thee, my daughter. Hast thou a desire in thy heart?"

"None, lord."

"Nay; answer truly! Hast thou a desire in thy heart?"

Then she cast down her eyes, and the tears came, and she wrung her hands and pressed them to her heart; and she

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said, "O my father, a clean heart—a clean heart would I have!"

And the Wise Man would have spoken; but the lad ran to the woman and took her by her clasped hands and would have dragged her toward the tents. "Come with us!" he cried.

And she looked at the Wise Man, who smiled at her and said, "We go to find the One whose word shall cleanse thy heart. Come!"

"We are one more, O my father," said the little lad as the caravan went on its way in the cool of the evening.

Thus they followed swift-flowing Jordan between the purple mountains until they came to the ford opposite Jericho and passed through tall grasses and rushes and oleanders, and forded the stream, and so came out on the plain of Jericho. In a grove of palms outside the city wall they spread their tents. The next morning a gentle winter rain veiled the mountains in mist. The caravan climbed slowly up the gorge on the way to the Holy City on the hills. The leper followed afar. Brown rocks, pitted with sinister caverns and shadowed mysteriously, rose on

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either hand. There were few travelers. One, a priest whom they overtook at the entrance to the gorge, joined himself to them for safety's sake, though he looked askance at some of the company. He walked beside the dromedary on whose back perched the little lad and his wise friend. As he walked he seemed to commune with himself in sadness. At length the Wise Man spoke.

“Heavy thoughts, O my brother, are a weary load for one who climbs the heights.”

“Verily,” said the other, and was silent for a time. Then he spoke, slowly, choosing his words. “A heavy heart maketh heavy thoughts. Year after year have I climbed this rocky road from my home in Jericho to my duties in the Temple on the Mount. All my days have I been faithful. I have kept the law, yea, the least jot and tittle of the law. I have fasted oft, and prayed ever, and tithed the very herbs of my garden; and I have searched the scrolls of the wisest of our teachers, and have been mindful of their injunctions; and it is all a weariness to my soul! A burden lieth here, and I know not how to lift it.”

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“Come thou with us,” said the Wise Man. “We be all seekers for the One who lifteth burdens from all heavy hearts. We have seen at its rising the star of thine own new-born King and Saviour, and we go to him. Come!”

“Ay, come!” cried the little lad; “soon we shall find him, and thou wilt be happy with us!”

“Mine own King? My Saviour?” repeated the priest, pondering. “Truly I know Messiah cometh—but when? If it were true! If this load within my breast were but gone . . .”

“Come,” said the little lad, bending toward him from the saddle; and as the priest slowly nodded assent, “We are one more, O my father,” he said, and the Wise Man smiled above the lad’s head.

The travelers came out from the head of the gorge, rounded the shoulder of the hill, and saw Jerusalem. They crossed the brook and climbed the slope and entered the great gate. Outside, by the deserted tombs on the hillside, the leper stayed.

And now of every man in inn and bazaar and market-place the Magi asked

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one question: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we saw his star at its rising, and we are come to worship him." To the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple towering above the city they climbed, and asked of the rabbis the same question. And none could answer it; but many laughed, and some wondered, and the city was filled with talk of the strangers. Thus it came to pass that a messenger from Herod stood at their door in the inn one day and bade them come before the King. To the palace they went, while the city gossiped and the little lad and the others of their motley train waited impatiently. At length they came.

"Where?" cried the little lad, "where is the King?"

And one of the Wise Men laid his hand on the lad's shoulder and answered: "In Bethlehem of Judæa, a short ride over the hills. Get word to thy leper friend without the gate to ride to the south. We ride at once."

Across the plain of Rephaim they went. It drew toward evening. The sky was clear that day, and the low sun flung the long shadows of wayside trees

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across the road. Slowly the travelers climbed the long, easy slope until at last they reached the top. The sun sank behind the billowing hills to the west. Stars began to show in the pale blue above. Before them, in the distance, lights began to glimmer faintly. The Wise Man waked the little lad and pointed. That was Bethlehem.

Suddenly a shout of joy went up. Over the lights of the town, and outblazing the brightest of the stars, shone one great star. The Wise Men urged their dromedaries on. The darkness deepened, and the star glowed the brighter. A shepherd's hut stood in vague bulk beside the road. The sound of the shepherd's pipe, shrill, clear, melancholy, fell upon their ears. As they came abreast of the hut the piping ceased. The shepherd stood by the roadside.

"Peace to you, O my brothers!" he called cheerily through the dusk.

The dromedaries stopped at a word.

"And to thee also, friend!" answered the foremost of the Wise Men. "Doth Bethlehem lie yonder?"

"Where the lights are," said the shepherd; then, with a new ring in his voice,

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“It may be—perchance ye seek the Babe?”

“Verily, we do,” came the eager response: “the new-born King. How knowest thou?”

“How know I?” The shepherd, as he stood in the darkness, seemed to smile. “How know I? I know by the word of the angel of God and by mine eyes. Thus: Here with my fellows I watched my sheep on the night when he was born; and suddenly an angel of the Lord stood by us, and the glory of the Lord shone round about us, and we were sore afraid. And the angel said unto us, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this is the sign unto you: Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good pleasure among men.’ And then it was dark again, and we looked with dazed eyes at one another, and we went to the town—we found the

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Babe — and worshipped — and came hither.”

“Is the Babe yonder?”

“Ay. In his mother’s arms he sleeps by now, in the inn by the market-place.”

They waited to hear no more. In the starlight they drew near to the town, hurrying between sweet-smelling fields and orchards toward their hearts’ desire. And in the inn, in his mother’s arms, they found the Babe. Then the servants of the Wise Men made the pack-camels kneel in the inn-yard, and took from their backs their lading of wondrous gifts, and brought them to the Wise Men; and they laid them before the Babe, and knelt and bowed to the ground before him.

Then from the doorway the bereaved mother stepped forward, and she spoke to Mary, who understood not her words, but her heart, and forthwith lifted the little one’s chubby hand and held it forth; and the woman sobbed and kissed the little hand and bathed it with her tears. Then she was comforted.

And the slave in his turn came and knelt; but he took the Babe’s dimpled foot in his brawny hand, and bowed his

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head, and put the little foot upon it, in token of a new-found slavery. And then knelt before the Babe the rich man with the unhappy soul; and in his eyes was a new light, and from his face a gray shadow had lifted.

There was a stir at the door, an outcry, and the ragged, wretched form of the leper fell at Mary's feet. With sudden timidity the man crouched there for a moment; then, with an access of courage—seeing that Mary did not snatch the child away—he stretched forth his hand and touched the white skirt of the Babe's robe. And suddenly he straightened himself and put back his head, and for sheer joy of heart he laughed aloud. And he cried in his Syriac tongue, "Clean! Clean!" One would have caught him by the shoulder and put him forth; but the little lad's wise friend spoke quickly, "Leave him alone. He is clean!"

Then, as if the leper had given her hope, the woman who had worn no veil crept forward and bowed to the earth before the Babe; but she said never a word; nor did any in the room open his lips. At last she lifted her head, and with furtive boldness put forth a hand

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and patted the Babe's knee, not knowing how else to show her love. And the Babe's fingers closed around one of her fingers, and he smiled into her face. She wept then ; but she wept for joy of the peace in her heart.

Then knelt the Jewish priest, and cried aloud for that same joy, "Now serve I no longer the Temple alone, but the Temple's Lord!" For the load was lifted from his heart also.

And last, the little lad, who had been kneeling by the Wise Men, rose and stepped forth and put his arms about the Babe, and kissed him. "For," he said, "I have found my Friend at the end of the road."

Thus the motley company came to Bethlehem.

But the Wisest of Wise Men had said never a word. A hint of what seemed now ridicule, now weariness, hung about his lips. As they rode southward over the hills before the dawn, he was still silent, until the little lad, from his perch, looked across at him and said reproachfully, "O Chokmah, thou didst not worship!"

"I could not," said the Wisest One.

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The lad looked up into the kindly face above his shoulder. "Why could he not, O my father?" he whispered.

The Wise Man shook his head sadly. "Thou wast right, my son. He is too wise. He came but to solve a riddle, not to loose a burden."

"Yea," said the lad; "I know."

"And how?"

"It is this way," said the lad. "He had no longing in his heart, but we—all the rest of us—we had a want in our hearts."

"Verily, thou hast said," returned the Wise Man. "He who seeks but to answer the world's riddles finds no answer, no, not even in the Babe. He who seeks a Saviour seeks never in vain."

And thus they rode away.

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